

Close up theater - an innovation in stage art studies

Msc. Dritan BORIÇI¹

DEPARTMENT OF APPLIED ARTS
EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY OF TIRANA
dritan.borici@uet.edu.al

Abstract

In this article we will try to offer a new perspective on the theater, and we will try to include the theater in other spaces to create artistic values, including digital technology. Since its beginning, the theater space has been a place to see, to watch, to present, to perceive, to understand. So, in a basic sense, theater has been and is a first pathway. At the core of the theatrical experience – as Peter Brook suggests – is the act of watching and being watched. Throughout the history of Western culture, the theater has been a primitive dance circle, a Greek amphitheater, a church, an Elizabethan stage, a market square, a garage, a street, a front stage theater, a Broadway theater, a theater house university, a restored warehouse or recently, even a digital platform on our laptop, computer, or mobile phone.

Close-up theater is a continuation of the conceptual changes that took place with theater spaces – and therefore – with the way of watching theater. In the past decades, Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, Ariane Mnouchkin in Paris, Peter Shuman in Vermont and Peter Brook from Africa in Avignon, France, have organized the theater space in different ways to bring the audience and the actors as close as possible to each

¹ **Msc. Dritan Boriçi** was born in 1972 in the city of Fier. After finishing his studies at the “Janaq Kilica” high school, he continued his studies at the Academy of Arts in Tirana. He graduated as an actor at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1994. In the period between 1995 and 2003, he was an actor at the Bylis Theater in Fier. Thanks to the talent that characterized him during the roles entrusted to him, he attracted the attention of the critics and the managers of the National Theatre, who invited him to be part of the troupe of this important institution and since 2003 he has been an actor of the National Theatre.

other. Peter Brook discovered one of the most significant axioms of future theater development by concluding:

“I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks along this empty space while someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed to be the starting point for an act of theater.” So, our computer screen is also an empty space where a man (actor) appears in front of us at a predetermined moment and we see him, a starting point for a theater act – recently labeled the theater of the relative plane.

The signs of close-up theater can also be found in other performances, on the Albanian and world stage, but this way of making theater had its rapid development during the global quarantine imposed by COVID 19.

Theaters all over the world interrupted the repertoire with their premieres. Until those moments, digital technology had contributed a lot to the process of advertising the show, being an important part of publicity. Facebook, YouTube, etc. they distributed posters, the processes of preparing a show, or interviews of theater makers, critical articles, various information, to stimulate the interest of the spectator.

As a result, the elements of a close-up theater were born:

1. Demand for investment in digital technology
2. The necessity to rediscover virtual artistic forms.
3. Adaptation of the home environment to work environment for artistic production.
4. Elements such as mobile phone, computer, laptop, - internet for the realization of the production.
5. The whole process of tests is feasible including individual and collective tests.
6. The process of improvisation and mixing with live music is realized.

1. Introduction

Anyone who thinks that theater is just that magical world that appears after the opening of a stage, under the spotlight, the display of decor, accommodated in the armchairs of a theater hall in the dark, is proven wrong. It has not been, is not and will not be just that.

Shakespeare - as the best known of the playwrights would write in his comedy “As you like it”:

“Everything the world has, a stage
All men and women, just actors”²

² Shakespeare. As you like it. Folger Shakespeare Library, f. 37

These lines are enough to liberate our perspective on theater, to attempt to discover theater in much wider spaces, and to create artistic value with everything, including digital technology. Since its inception, the theatrical space has been a place to see, to watch, to present, to perceive, to understand. So, in a basic sense theater has been and is a first way. At the heart of the theatrical experience - as Peter Brook suggests - is the act of watching and being watched. Places for theater to happen have been created in all societies, ancient and modern. Throughout history, the theatrical space has been prepared in such a way that the audience can watch, and the performer can be watched. The ancient Greeks called this special place where the public sat to watch the plays "THEATRON" or "Place to watch". At one time or another in the history of Western culture, this place has been a primitive dance circle, a Greek amphitheater, a church, an Elizabethan stage, a market square, a garage, a street, a pre-stage theater, a theater Broadway, a university theater house, a restored warehouse or, more recently, a digital platform on our laptop, computer, or mobile phone³.

In his article "Weak Universalization", the essayist, art critic, media theorist and key contemporary German philosopher Boris Groys writes:

"The tradition in which our contemporary art world operates - including our current art institutions - was formed after World War II. This tradition is based on the practices of the historical avant-garde art - and their renewal and codification during the 1950s and 1960s. Now, no one has the impression that this tradition has changed much since then. On the contrary, over time it has become more and more powerful."⁴

2. Features of Close –up theatre

Close up theater is a continuation of the conceptual changes that occurred with theatrical spaces - and consequently - with the way theater was viewed precisely in the years to which Groys refers. Over the past decades Jerzy Grotowski in Poland, Ariane Mnouchkin in Paris, Peter Schuman in Vermont and Peter Brook from Africa in Avignon, France, have organized theatrical space in various ways to bring audiences and actors closer together. At a time when the theatrical experience was "calcified" inside theater halls, with a spectator specially engaged for the theater, they developed a way of thinking about non-traditional theatrical spaces. One of the greatest directors and explorers of theater, Peter Brook, would discover one of the most significant axioms of theatrical development in the future. In his book "Empty Space" he concludes:

³ Barranger, Milly S. *Theatre : A way of seeing.* – Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1991, f. 4

⁴ Groys, Boris. *Politika e instalacionit.* – Tiranë : Botimet Princi, 2015, f. 99

“I can take any empty space and call it a naked stage. “One person walks through this empty space while someone else is watching it, and that’s all it takes to be the starting point for a theatrical act.”⁵ Is not our computer screen an empty space where in front of us at a predetermined moment a man (actor) appears and we are seeing him, a starting point for a theatrical act - recently labeled close-up theater?

While the great revolutionary of the theater Jerzy Grotovski would “strip” the theater of many elements that for him were superfluous and obscured the creative force of the theater. In his book “For a poor theater” he states:

“Gradually eliminating everything that was superfluous, we realized that the theater could exist without makeup, without costumes and without decorative scenography, without a line that separates the hall from the stage, without sound effects and without light effects, etc ... Accepting poverty in the theater, giving up everything parasitic, has rediscovered not only the essence of this instrument, but also the unexplored wealth that lies in the most intimate depths of the artistic form”⁶

The beginnings of close-up theater can be traced back to those theatrical productions when, in collaboration with digital directing technology or various scenographers, they realized artistic communication in theaters. There are many examples in the world, but the most significant are those developed during the 70s and which were called THEATER OF VISION with main representatives Robert Willson (playwright and producer) and Lee Breuer (director). In their parts we find actors who face, among other things, holographic forms. They realized a new mix of creative resources including technology. Robert Willson creates life-size paintings on stage with sounds, sculptural forms, music, and visual images. In his work A LETTER TO QUEEN VICTORIA which appeared in the abbreviated version on Broadway in 1974 he also introduced television images and film clips. One theme of the piece was American imperialism, but instead of discussing the subject, Willson simply projected his IMAGE.

LEE BREUER in his play HAJJ written and performed by him in 1983 at the Public Theater, is a long “interpretive poem” in which a woman (Ruth Maleczek) sits at a table, is seen in a multi-plane mirror, and looks not only at her reflex but also at her past, projected onto large screens from a circle of camcorders and pre-recorded tapes. This pilgrimage within the brain reveals how art is produced from reflections of the present and memories of the past. His company MINERAL MABOU is the leader of the avant-garde, it is a model of experimentalism in writing, acting, directing, production, technology. Their work mixes a strong thread of high-tech narrative. However, there are many examples in the late twentieth century and early twentieth century, but we must note what is really called close-up theater.

⁵ Barranger, Milly S. Theatre : A way of seeing. – Wadsworth Publishing Company : Belmont, California, 1991, f. 2.

⁶ Grotovski, Jerzhi. Për një teatër të varfër. – Universiteti AAB – Riinvest, Prishtinë, 2010, f. 101

Theater is an art that is created the moment we see it. For theater to happen, two groups of people, actors, and spectators, must come together at the same time and in the same place. There, the actors introduce themselves in front of the audience in a story that usually contains some aspects of being human. It is very important for anyone trying to highlight the close-up theater from the variety of performances, videos, or other digital art forms this quality of theater immediacy. Close up theater, like contemporary art, deserves its name to the extent that it manifests its contemporaneity. Being contemporary can be understood as being present at the same time, as being here and now. In this sense, art in general and close-up theater seem to be truly contemporary if it is perceived as capable of capturing and expressing the presence of the present in a way that is radically uncorrupted by past traditions.

In the Albanian theater, a fragment of the close-up theater can be found in the TAG play of the National Theater, realized in 2019, where at one point in the play, the character played by the actor Artan Imami, communicated with other actors on stage through a relatively large screen. The actor was performing at that moment in an environment next to the theater in front of a camera and responding to the dialogue that took place on stage. In this form the condition of the quality of the immediateness of the theater was realized.

Signs of close-up theater can be found in other performances, on the Albanian and world stage, but this way of doing theater had its rapid development during the time of the Chinese Virus, and especially during the global quarantine imposed by COVID 19. Theaters around the world interrupted the repertoire with their premieres. Every stage of the live theater was locked up and the public and the theater makers were isolated in their homes, breaking away from their traditional communication in theaters, whether classical or alternative, indoors or outdoors. Up to that point digital technology had greatly contributed to the show's advertising process being an important part of publicity. Facebook, YouTube, etc. distributed posters, the processes of preparing a play, or interviews with theatergoers, critical articles, various information, to stimulate the interest of the spectator. Quarantine interrupted the "heart" of the entire production process of a theater - the play. Many theaters around the world lost their subscribers and many contracts were broken due to this global disaster. To rekindle communication with the spectator theaters sought the help of technology. Of course, the emergence of communication and artistic existence made many theaters around the world display on their personalized social networks, free of charge, some of the recent masterpieces of their repertoire. In those early days of existential psychological shock for the theater genre, just a simple internet search was enough, and you could endlessly see masterpieces by the world's greatest authors performed by theatrical troupes that today are at the forefront of theatrical developments where sometimes their

perfection seems unattainable. Zero-budgeted troupes that were already forced to showcase their professional achievements to every spectator in the world, even though most of them could not buy a ticket and see the stage live.

A keen eye, however, realized that theaters around the world were strengthening their technological structures to enter the close-up theater experiment. The Albanian National Theater - as the leading theater in the Albanian territories, initially established on the WhatsApp network a communication line with all its artistic and technical staff entitled "Communication, ideas and debates" where every evening, at a certain hour, dialogue took place through messages and sometimes in the Zoom network for artistic forms that had to be used in order not to lose contact with the gender of the theater and the spectator. On April 2, 2020, the director of the National Theater Hervin Çuli sends an open letter to the Prime Minister of the country about the urgent need of the theater for investments in digital technology to be able to perform its function in these extreme conditions like many theaters in the world. Among other things he wrote:

"We need to rediscover new artistic forms to nurture and educate repressed souls. With the actors of the National Theater... we are working to offer our virtual creativity... in the absence of a stage they are adapting the kitchen, hallway, bedroom, sometimes even the balcony as work and artistic production... actors besides the phone and charger (sometimes even laptop) do not have no other means. We will do the show (online program) anyway, but it will be very depressing for the quality to be questioned, because we have no support for such productions. The National Theater, unlike any serious theater in Europe, has no technical ability to facilitate production. We lack post-production studios that deal with high artistic quality editing of images, subtitles, etc.'

And so began the first online production in Albania "The Show must go on" - from Thursday to Sunday on social networks - 25 - 30 min. with readings of poems, prose, interviews etc. After this panorama it should be said that "The show must go on" was not yet a close-up theater, because as I predicted for the theater to exist, it must have the element of immediacy. "The show must go on" was a program that did not take place at the time the viewer was watching. He was previously recorded by each actor in one of the premises of his house, then sent with WeTransfer to a base point where the music was edited and mixed, and then broadcast on the day called to the spectators who followed him on Facebook. un of the National Theater. So, something pre-prepared like the repertoire shows of a theater that were already appearing endlessly on social media. The reason I analyze it is because there we find many of the elements of a close-up theater:

1. Demand for investment in digital technology
2. The necessity to rediscover virtual artistic forms.

3. Adaptation of home environments to work environments for artistic production.
4. Elements such as mobile phone, computer, laptop, - internet for the realization of production.

After the National Theater, there were other theaters in Albania that showed the performances of their troupe online. The most active were the initiatives of the director Driada Dervishi with the troupe of the Theater “Aleksandër Mojsiu” Durrës and not only, the interpretation of Chekhov’s stories and “Evening Letters”, as well as “Monologue” by the Metropolitan Theater. But these performances were pre-recorded and tended to rush towards the genre of film rather than theater. So, we have more of an art documentation than an instant art that is the basis of theater.

The film from its inception claimed to be able to document and represent life in a way that was inaccessible to the traditional arts, while theater as other time-based arts realize and represents life the moment, they take place in their immediacy. According to Groys “at the beginning of the 21st century, art entered a new era - mass artistic production, and not just mass consumption of art. Making a video and showing it via the internet became an easy operation, open to almost anyone. The practice of self-documentation has become a massive practice and even a massive obsession. Contemporary communications tools and networks like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, and Twitter give global populations the opportunity to present their photos, videos, and texts in a way that is indistinguishable from any post-conceptual work of art”⁷

However, from the online productions of the Aleksandër Mojsiu Theater and that of the Metropolis Theater, it is valid for the Close-up Theater:

5. The movement of the actor in different environments for the development of dramatic action

During the work with the students for the development of the subjects “Introduction to Acting” and “Scenic Speaking” during the quarantine, the European University of Tirana made available to its professors and students the Teams network. A perfect network for pedagogical work. During the preparation of materials that would be interpreted by students in the exams between and the end of semester we encounter important elements of close-up theater. During the individual rehearsals, the teacher-student (director-actor) relationship was immediate. The lecturer and the student (director and actor) fulfilled all the

⁷ Groys, Boris. *Politika e Instalacionit*. – Botimet Princi : Tiranë, 2015, f. 114

requirements of the functioning of the rehearsals in a traditional theater - text analysis, division of actions, goals, obstacles, objects to be used during the interpretation and everything used for professional interpretation. The general rehearsals where the student-actor performed and the lecturer (in this case the spectator together with the other students) function perfectly. There were students who, having the ability to sing or perform musical instruments, introduced the element of improvisation as an added value in their performance.

So, we can add:

6. The whole evidence process is feasible including individual and collective evidence.
7. The process of improvisation and mixing with live music is realized.

A very ambitious project in the international space is the one directed by the director, PhD. John Blondell (Professor of Theatrical Arts and Head of the Department of Theatrical Arts at Westmont College in Santa Barbara USA). As co-founder and director of the Lit Moon Theater Company in early May 2020 he created an international online troupe of actors, composers, and technicians from around the globe:

Vardan Mirtchyan (Yerevan) Armenia, Ognen Drangovski (Bitola) Macedonia, Evdokimos Tsolakidis (Athens) Greece, Nina Sallinen (Los Angeles via Helsinki) Finland, Sergej Mardar (San Petersburg) Russia, Ramona Shah (Tehran) Iran, Elena Kalinina (San Petersburg) Russia, Paige Tautz (Santa Barbara) USA, Dritan Boriçi (Tirana) Albania.

Costumes: Blagoj Micevski (Bitola) Macedonia, Music: James Connelly (Santa Barbara) USA and Vache Sharafyan, (Yerevan) Armenia. Assistant Director Cierra Denning (Parker) Colorado USA. Adaptation: Libby Appel (Santa Barbara) USA.

Their first project was “Uncle Vanya” Anton Chekhov entitled “Vanja in quarantine”.

Some notes by John Blondell about the actors during this project:

“Keep composing, inventing, and developing what you are doing: expressiveness, exposure, intimacy is soooooo magnificent. Keep working with the camera as with your partner, keep developing these practices that we are working on.”

8. Work with the camera as with your partner

The second project was Anton Chekhov’s “Ivanov” entitled “Ivanov in quarantine”.

Some notes by John Blondell about the actors during this project.)

“Notes for Tuesday.

22 September

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow! We will do Act I and II, so please be prepared with ideas, things you want to try, or things we have worked on for both acts. If you are in both acts, please come up with some sort of change in costume - it may be small, but just something to show that time has passed between these acts.

Remember: invent, invent, invent. Play, create small atmospheres for yourself, travel between spaces, bring things to eat and drink....

3. Conclusions

When we were making Vanja, Elena said that she enjoyed “making her small theater one meter” that we must imagine, to invent. Come prepared to try things out - we’ll just have one more rehearsal for this part of the show, the Sunday before we perform.

Tell the Story! Make the story and work with the MOST COMPACT text. I want to increase the tempo-rhythm a little more, make the story vibrant, vital, and compact.

And suddenly....

I am thinking somewhat about the nature of time, how things happen, when things happen, why things happen, when things happen in their own way and time. Some things bubble right away and BUM!

Something changes. Other things bubble and gurgle and are barely there... They just lie beneath the surface, and something happens to bring them up and out, in daylight, and then they change...

Occasionally change is planned and never fulfilled. Sometimes change happens without him mindful, sometimes life just seems to go on forever, and then BAM, the change happens.

Maybe the whole drama is built on the Unexpected! Suddenly something happens that no one expected... Nora tells Torvald that they should talk, Laert cuts Hamlet with a sword, Antigona chooses to bury the tup again. Chekhov is interesting, because it happens that his SURPRISE comes too late, long periods of this and that and tweets and chats and quarrels about this and that and then UAU!!! Something is happening. In this part, they talk a lot, and we then suddenly are at the end of Act II where people decide to start a new life, kiss, and then... BAM! Suddenly!!!

Look for surprises you may have... when something changes, something changes, when something dawns on you, when something bubbles and bubbles and something new comes out and shines or catches you or catches you or pushes you and makes you scream or to jump upwards.

Suddenly! That's life...

9. Changing costumes between acts to show the passage of time
10. Dealing with new objects when you do not have text.
11. Work on a stage of no more than 1 square meter.

This project is a continuation of it.

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